[Etiwan Island and Its People]

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ETIWAN ISLAND AND ITS PEOPLE

Etiwan Island is about thirty miles southwest of Charleston, South Carolina. Only a few years ago a journey from the mainland to Etiwan was a real adventure and a rather

unpleasant one. There was a causeway of pluff mud to travel and the road was often severed by tide water. It was a trip never to be taken lightly.

Many of the island inhabitants remember the time when Etiwan was yet more inaccessible. They recall the days before the old pre-Confederate War causeway was rebuilt, and the only connection with the outside world was by river steamer. The island was almost completely isolated then - no cause-way, no telephone or telegraph lines and no radios. After the steamer Mary Draper left the wharf at eight o'clock in the morning, the chances of getting off Etiwan were practically nonexistent. But the islanders did not worry about this state of affairs, apparently. They seemed contented enough.

Now Etiwan can be reached in less than an hour from Charleston. The causeway had been raised above the level of the spring tides and the road surfaced. Automobiles pass in long processions, bound for the palmetto fringed beach which looks toward Saint Helena sound. Newspapers are delivered a few hours after they come from the press, and radios bleat out the song of the crooner in many an island home. Ugly, smelly, little freight beats, propelled 2 by gasoline motors have replaced the graceful river steamers. High wheel carts with bright blue bodies, drawn by horses or oxen, seldom venture on the highway, and surries and buggies have disappeared. The machine age has come to Etiwan.

It is the land of palmettoes, short leaf pines, live oaks, laurels and sweet myrtles. Weeds spring up overnight and grow to amazing sizes. Cassina, flaming with red berries, and yucca topped in the spring with white waxy blooms, stands against a background of evergreens. Trees are slashed down in a frenzy to build new roads and to clear new land, but greenery is born almost every day, and ugly bare places are severed with grasses and flowers while the backs of the pioneers are turned. Some spots have never been touched since the days of the Indians. Here the lush growth harbors small wood creatures - the coon, the o'possum, the mink and the rabbit- and here the birds live out their lives in peace. Chinaberry and bamboo vines block ingress by human beings. These places are veritable jungles.

Almost anything will grow on the island. The winters are mild and the summers sub-tropical. The soil has been cultivated for two centuries and is yet capable of producing fine crops if the money can be found to plant them.

Salt rivers and vast stretches of marshland bound the island on three sides. The ocean roars to the southeast, Barrier islands lift whitely above the green marsh and blue estuaries; holding back the sea from Etiwan. To the rear creeks wind snakily through muddy 3 meadows and oyster grounds. The tide ebbs and flows, eating deeper into the soil of Etiwan, a scant mile behind the barrier reef.

Etiwan is only a few feet above sea level. When a hurricane comes howling in from the east, big waves are born and the ocean rushes through the gaps between the sand dunes and covers the marsh meadows. Soon the lower fields and swamp areas of the island are flooded. Crops are swept away, trees are torn up by the roots and roofs lifted from dwellings and barns. No lives have been lost in recent hurricanes, but near the turn of the century thirty-three persons were drowned when a storm tide drove them out of their houses.

Salt creeks cut the island into crazy quilt patterns. On Etiwan one is seldom out of the sight of tidal water and marshland. Dwellings are built near the creeks and rivers for coolness and because it is always wise to be near the fishing drop and oyster and clam beds. Little account is taken of the cold bitter winds that blow across these waters in the winter, for an Etiwan summer lasts a long time and cold weather is soon past and forgotten.

Many of the islanders made comfortable livings until the boll-weevil put an end to the cultivation of sea island cotton. A storm might utterly destroy a cotton crop but there was always the factor to advance money until the next crop could be harvested. No one was especially worried about finances in these days. Planters, ginners, storekeepers and even harvest hands made money on sea island cotton.

The staple brought from twenty-five cents to one dollar a pound. Cotton was an good as money in the bank any day, probably better, and 4 a plantation near the salt was considered a splendid investment and guilt edge security for a loan. Even a person unacquainted with the art of planting could make a good living out of sea island cotton, if he had suitable lands and a foreman who knew his business.

The coming of the boll-weevil resulted in the breaking up of the plantation system. Short staple cotton never successfully replaced long staple. The former required less labor and brings in less money. Truck farming was a gamble. The Negroes left Etiwan by the hundreds and the younger generation of whites followed their example. Black and white could only think of farming in terms of sea island cotton culture. They knew nothing else. Diversified farming was a closed book to them. The island was too far from the markets to make truck gardens and cattle raising profitable. Etiwan was never a fruit growing region. Dairying was impracticable. The trek to the cities began.

About half of the white people of the island are descendants of English, Scots, and French Huguenots who settled on Etiwan shortly after Charleston was founded. Their's is a feudal background. Fragments of the feudal system still persist on some of the plantations, for a few Negroes, whose ancestors served as slaves, cling to the soil that their fathers and grandfathers cultivated, giving “day's work” in exchange for planting land. Customs and traditions die hard on Etiwan.

The rest of the white population is made up of pinelanders, a handfull of school teachers, [road?] builders and store clerks, and 5 several brass-ankle families, all resent settlers. They came to the island - most of them - after the bridge replaced the manpower ferry in 1914. More pinelanders arrive every year. Soon they will outnumber the original island people three to one.

The pinelanders are people who have been born and reared in the more isolated and desolate parts of the pineland belt, a few score miles north of the sea islands. Hook worm, poor land and inadequate educational facilities have kept these folk at a low cultural level.

The blood of the Indian, the Negro and the Caucasian flows in the veins of the Brass-ankles. In a physical sense the Indian strain is perhaps the strongest, but they have many of the characteristics of the Negroes with whom many of them associate. The white blood has about run out.

Two millionaires, men of the north, discovered Etiwan after the crash on Wall Street. The first Northerner established winter quarters late in 1929, and the second came about three years later. Between them they own something like 4,000 acres. All of this acreage [has?] been turned into hunting preserves, except the grounds surrounding the dwellings. The lands are as carefully watched for prowling cats, dogs and cows, as the planter watched his land for caterpillars and boll-weevils.

Out of the roads labeled “private”, on almost any day of the hunting season, emerge station wagons filled with pedigreed bird dogs; big open automobiles bearing sportsmen, red faced with the 6 cold; and little groups of men, women and children, astride haughtily stepping mounts. Negroes who work on the estate, scrape and bow as the cars and horses pass by. Since the man of wealth came to the plantation, the Negroes have been working rather steadily, making five days out of the week if they cared to put in that much time. On Saturdays they draw as their week's wage as much as three dollars and seventy-five cents. The horses disappear down the road in a cloud of grey dust and the Negroes resume their slow walk.

At the end of a long oak lined avenue, stands a plantation dwelling built a few years after the Revolutionary War. The house has been “restored” and is resplendent in its new coat of paint. Much of the old atmosphere has been preserved. Everything has a colonial air about it except the new paint job, the plumbing, the heating and refrigerating plants. A

wine cellar has been installed in keeping with the ancient tradition. The house is a fine example of a modernized antique.

The outbuildings are strictly British as is the head groomsman who in seen about the Tudor type stables and garages. The neatly clipped hedges and rows of hot houses are also reminiscent of manor grounds of old England, but the towering live oaks dripping with grey moss gives the effect of misplaced stage scenery.

The other millionaire of Etiwan razed the post Confederate War monstrosity that he found on his estate and erected a combination cottage and hunting lodge. It was built with an eye to comfort and convenience and makes no concession to colonial architecture.

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Deer drives, quail hunts and duck shoots start from this lodge and when the day's sport is over, the hunters are back again by the fire; toasting their feet, and talking excitedly about how the dogs behaved and why the stag got away. It is never boring for these winter residents while hunting is good. They leave before the spring comes to Etiwan.

Many trees on the border of the estate bristle with signs saying “No Trespassing,” “Private Property”, and “Private Road.” The islanders take these warnings seriously. Signs are rare things on Etiwan and therefore doubly impressive.

The typical pinelanders and the brass ankles live in little raw looking houses built of pine saplings or in cabins that were abandoned by Negroes during the time of the migration. Seldom do these houses contain more than three rooms, and the average house only two. The room that opens on outdoors is called the “hall” and the other compartment, the “bed room.” A tall man can cross the hall in two steps, while one stop and a half could cover the bed room. In the hall, the family sits, eats and cooks. The fireplace in the predominating feature. The husband, the wife and the younger children sleep in the other cubicle and the older children sleep on the hall room floor or in the left.

The house holder who has a tight roof over his head and a solid floor beneath his feet is lucky. Many of the roofs leak like sieves and the floors have cracks and holes in them. The house that is ceiled is a rare exception. During cold weather it is necessary to keep the fire going day and night, otherwise the 8 young and tender would probably freeze to death. It can get cold on Etiwan sometimes. Kerosene and milk have been known to solidify indoors.

Water is supplied by an outside pump or open well. Fortunately open wells are disappearing on the island, for ten feet of piping and a pitcher pump can be bought for about four dollars. It does not occur to the average pinelander, brass ankle or negro, however, to have the water analyzed, and he uses it year after year without questioning its purity.

Bathing is a painful ordeal after frost comes. Standing before an open fire, dipping one hand experimentally in a basin of water, burning up on one side, freezing on the other, feeling an icy draught run up one's spine - this is not a pleasant experience. No wonder the rite of bathing is seldomed practiced by these people except in warm weather.

The island Negroes live much after the same fashion, although the houses that they have erected for themselves in recent years are generally more confortable than the usual plantation cabin type. Sometimes the newer houses are ceiled, and actually boast porches and kitchens. Bath rooms, are, of course, unknown.

Unlike the homes of the old families and the millionaires, the dwellings of the pinelanders are generally situated in the woods. They seem to prefer it this way. The salt streams have little appeal for them for they were reared far from the water. When a pinelander moves in he invariably cuts down all of the trees immediately surrounding his house and plows up the yard. The ground is leveled 9 off later and the housewife comes out with a broom and sweeps the plot every morning. Few, if any flowers are seen about the premises, but

always there are clothing hanging out to dry in plain view. The garments provide a note of color that helps to lighten up the place.

Above all the pinelanders prefer a house on the public road. Then they can sit on their front door steps and watch the fine cars speeding to the beach and hold converse with the neighbors who come shuffling by on tired feet.

The newcomers till small farms of their own or work for the large truck planters, and some of them share crop. One family makes a few dollars a month by operating a grits mill; others run little stores. During the prohibition era several turned to boot-legging or distilling corn whiskey. Boys were kept from school whenever their fathers wanted them to lend a hand with the making of the mash. Since repeal, these who once dealt in moonshine liquor have had a hard time making ends meet. A fairly large percentage are now on relief.

Not all of the newcomers who have moved to Etiwan from the pinelands across the river are in straightened circumstances. Several own large truck farms or operate well stocked stores, and maintain on the whole a fairly high standard of living. Their children attend school regularly and after graduating from the island high school, generally enter one of the state colleges.

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Socially they mingle very little with the original island families. Pinelanders are still strangers an Etiwan.

The descendants of the early settlers form a distinct class. For six or seven generations the families have intermarried, and within this circle almost everyone is kin. There have been, of course, many marriage alliances with people of the outside world, and the bars are gradually being lowered, but a common heritage still ties these natives together. A recent count showed that there were thirty-three families in this group and a total of about 108 individuals.

Their number in dwindling every year for most of the young people move away as soon as they get their college degrees. The old order is on its way out. A half dozen old family names have became extinct in the last decade.

Nine of the thirty-three families live in plantation houses that were built before the War Between The States. Seven owners have managed to keep their dwellings in good order and enjoy such conveniences as modern plumbing and acetylene or electric lights. The other two ante-bellum houses are battered wrecks, with barn-like rooms, sagging columns and crumbling steps. There in no money for repairs. Every dime is needed for food and clothing.

The people who compose the thirty-three families make their living in various ways - truck farming, storekeeping, teaching school, working for governmental agencies. None of them could be called 11 wealthy and some can barely meet their grocery bills. These in the lowest income brackets illuminate their houses with kerosene lamps and forego the luxury of bath rooms, sinks and running water. Four of the men are on work relief but none have asked for direct aid from the government.

All of these people have seen better days. It was not very long ago - eight years at the most - that every head of a family was gainfully employed or was running a profitable business. Their houses might have lacked certain conveniences but there were servants to do the rough work, and yard boys to chop up wood, feed the stock and hoe the vegetables garden. A month's vacation in the mountains or a trip to New York for a week's fun could be handled without digging into their savings. Six generations of comfortable living was behind them. It never seemed to occur to them that conditions might change.

Since the economic depression which reached Etiwan in 1932, seven heads of families have lost their accumulated savings and their jobs or businesses. The men go about with a bewildered look on their faces. Their world has been turned upside down. They are much

less fit to cope with reality than the pinelanders or the brass ankles who have never known anything but hard times.

Eight years of constant job hunting have convinced these men that industry will never have anything to offer them. They cannot afford to start farming again. It would take a couple of thousand dollars to equip the average farm and to buy seed and fertilizers, 12 and even if the means were provided the chances of success would be exceedingly doubtful. So they go on relief or take any temporary job that comes their way, or accept aid from relatives.

Because there are no railroads or bus lines on Etiwan the people of this class say that they are forced to own automobiles. A man can hardly walk ten to forty miles to work, they explain, and if illness comes there must be some way to get to the city for there is no longer a practicing physician on the island. Money that should be spent for clothing, food and doctor bills, is used to buy tires and gasoline.

The poverty stricken Negroes and pinelanders fare better in event of serious illness. The clinics of Charleston and the county hospital is open to them, free of cost, and charitably inclined neighbors give them lifts in their automobiles when the need arises. Charity is seldom offered to people who once walked proudly, and is rarely accepted.

Every now and then they talk in a romantic way about the possibility of reviving the sea island cotton industry but they know that the industry is just as dead as their ancestors who lie in the plantation graveyards.

SOURCE: Chalmers S. Murray

Edisto Island, S. C.